A FRENCH SLAVE
IN NAZI GERMANY

A TESTIMONY

ELIE POULARD

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Author’s Preface

To add my testimony to history and for my children and grandchildren to remember, here is the story of what I lived through during the Second World War, and how I felt about the events that marked those six horrible years.

I spent my youth and my adolescence in the village of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ in the middle of the valley of the river Marne, which gave its name to two ghastly battles during the First World War. Like all the young men and women of that region, I was deeply affected by the view of the ruins and the numerous military cemeteries left behind by that war. I was obsessed with the idea that those of my generation might have to witness also such horrors. With the rise of Hitler in Germany and the advent of the Nazi regime, my fears increased, and I thought that, unless a miracle happened, nothing could stop a new impending catastrophe. Yet if the politicians that governed France had been a bit more clear-sighted, it could have been averted.

Beginning in April 1934, I was employed by the Clerc pharmacy, located in the town of Aÿ, as an apprentice to become an assistant pharmacist. I remember that as I arrived at the establishment on March 7, 1936, a gendarme at the counter was commenting on the day’s event: the reoccupation of the demilitarized region of the Rhineland by German troops. This was a clear violation of the Treaty of Versailles, which had ended World War I. This policeman was arguing that the only valid response was to send the French army into that territory to push back Hitler’s move and that it could be done without too much bloodshed. If that was not done, he predicted, France would be at war in three or four years. I thought
the man was right, and I believed that many other people were in favor of French action. The *gendarme* had indeed sized up the situation correctly.

Hitler had made his first move on the chessboard of Europe. Since there was no reaction from the French or the British, he was comforted in his intentions. Two years later, on March 12, 1938, he annexed Austria to the Third Reich in what was called the *Anschluss*.

After leaving school at the age of twelve, having passed my *Certificat d’Etudes*, I began to learn music. I took saxophone lessons for four months, and at the beginning of April 1934, I became a member of the Mareuil-sur-Aÿ *fanfare*, or municipal band. In June 1938, I successfully passed the exam of the first section of the Confédération Musicale de France. In doing so, I received a first prize in *solfège* and in saxophone with twenty points out of twenty. The jury was composed of Monsieur Petit, who was president of the Musical Federation of Champagne and Meuse, and Monsieur Jules Moineaux from the village of Chouilly. The latter was the assistant director of the Grande Fanfare Champenoise. This great regional band was then led by Félicien Foret, who was assistant director of the Paris Republican Guard’s brass band.

The Grande Fanfare was a high level orchestra. To become a member of it, one had to have excellent references or be sponsored by a current member. In my case, I was presented by Monsieur Moineaux, who had highly recommended that I be part of that orchestra after I had done so well on the musical exam mentioned above. Thus, I had the honor to play in that orchestra for a year.

At that time, a young man from Mareuil, Marcel Braine, had organized a group of Jeunesses Ouvrières Catholiques (JOC), or
Catholic Working Youth, an organization formed to keep young people religiously involved after they had joined the work force. I joined the group along with some of my friends. We would meet once a week, and, once a month, we would invite other young men of the town to join us as our guests. Once the Germans occupied Mareuil in 1940, these meetings were forbidden. However, I remained faithful to the JOC, and this organization had a great influence on my entire life.

In September 1938, the French government mobilized its military reservists, those who had been given a so-called *fascicule bleu*—a blue military booklet. Among them were men who had already fought in World War I, such as Mareuil’s mandoline teacher, Monsieur Gotrot. I remember that these men left with the intention of bringing Hitler down. They said that they preferred to fight again so that their sons would not know the horrors of war. Unfortunately, instead of a fight there was the shame of the September 29, 1938, accords of Munich, which gave to Hitler a good chunk of Czechoslovakia. Faced with foolish Western leaders, he invaded the rest of that country on March 15, 1939. Still, most people around me wanted to believe in Hitler’s promise of peace. Alas!
On April 30, 1939, the Grande Fanfare gave its annual concert, broadcast on the radio, from the theater of Epernay. This concert was honored by the presence of Henri Rabaud, member of the French Academy and director of the National Conservatory of Paris. During the reception, Monsieur Moineaux introduced me to the music director of the 106th Infantry Regiment of Reims, because I wanted to enlist in the army musical corps so that I could be involved in musical studies. I wanted to make music my profession. It was decided that I would meet him some day at the military band quarters, and that he would accompany me to have my physical examination.

By that time, I had finished my apprenticeship and was thus an assistant pharmacist. Monsieur Clerc had sold his establishment to Jeanne Pierson, a young pharmacist with a diploma from the University of Nancy; Monsieur Clerc’s former assistant had another job in the Paris region. Thus I replaced him, though with a much lower salary. But then, I did not really want to make a career as an assistant pharmacist.

In June 1939, I passed my second musical exam, at a higher level, of the Musical Confederation of France. Again, I obtained first prize in solfège and musical dictation with twenty points out of twenty. I also got first prize with my saxophone with a grade of 19.5 and the congratulations of the jury for my performance.

Near the end of June, I went to the caserne, an urban military base, of the 106th Infantry Regiment. There, I asked for the music director, but unfortunately I was told that he was off that day. However, I found a warrant officer who directed the saxophones. To my surprise, this fellow was the man who had played next to me in the Grande Fanfare. With him was a certain Dervaux, the son of a piano teacher from Aÿ. They made me play my instrument as a test, and they concluded that I would not have any problem being incorporated into the army musical corps. Thus, I went to the infirmary to take my physical. A young doctor examined me and found that I was fit to serve.

His superior, however, arrived before I had left and examined me in his turn. He found that I was too skinny, and nullified the decision of his subordinate. I was very disappointed but decided to
come back one day to try again to meet the music director. But I put off my visit too long, and soon the end of August arrived. Considering the unfolding events, I gave up on my project of getting into the 106th Infantry Regiment. Then, my life, just like that of so many other people, was drastically affected by the German aggression and occupation of my home town.
Editor’s Introduction

What follows are the recollections of one of the 600,000 Frenchmen who were sent against their will to work for the German Nazi regime by the French government. Such was the fate of Elie Poulard, a very religious young man, twenty-two-years old in 1943, forced into hard labor by an ignominious “law” of the French Vichy government called Service du Travail Obligatoire, or STO for short. In 1939, when World War II began in Europe, Elie had not been conscripted into the French army, for he was only eighteen. By the time he would have been drafted, France had lost the war, and the Germans occupied most of the country, including the village where he lived with his family, on the Marne River in the heart of the Champagne country. When he left for forced labor in Germany, I, his youngest brother, was about three years old. When he was liberated in 1945 by the Americans and came home, I barely knew him. It took me a long time to look upon him as my big brother, especially since he soon left home to settle in the Nièvre department in central France, where he was born.

It was not until the 1960s that we began to see each other regularly. It was when we were alone, sometimes late at night, that we would have long discussions that turned to his experiences during the war. He would tell me stories about his life in Germany, mentioning the places he had been sent to, names of many of the people he had met, and describing his hard labor in different work sites.
He had suffered greatly during his two years as not much more than a slave of the Nazi regime. However, he was not bitter; he always inserted some humor in his descriptions. As a fervent Catholic, he considered that what he had endured was the will of God and a test of his faith.

Thus, for the better part of thirty years, I heard him retelling his anecdotes, very often prodded by my questions: Why did he not join the Résistance? Why did he not just go into hiding? Did anyone try to help him do that? Did he meet decent Germans along the way? Who mistreated him the most? What horrors had he seen? I was always asking for as many details as he could give. One day, I finally asked my brother to put down on paper all of these stories, all these recollections, and to send his handwritten pages to me. I said that I would type and edit them, organize them into chapters, and ultimately send him a manuscript that he could perhaps get published in France. It was only in 1994 that he began to write his recollections of the awful time he had spent in Germany.

By 1996, we had a decent manuscript in French that had been reviewed by several of our friends. Attempts to get it published by one French university press or another were unsuccessful. However in 2005, four hundred copies were printed as a small booklet by the Association Départementale des Déportés du Travail de la Nièvre, to which Elie belonged. Rather than using the somewhat bland title that I had given it, Témoignages de Guerre, or War Testimonies, Elie chose a longer title that made the point that he had not merely been an unwilling slave of the Nazis, but rather, as a devout Catholic and member of the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC), he had done his bit to resist his masters, especially with his spiritual assistance to his comrades, something strictly forbidden by the Nazis. Thus, he entitled his book Mémoires d’un Jociste Déporté du Travail: Résistance Spirituelle, 1943–1945.

This little book was well received by those who bought and read it. (See for example, the letter to Elie written by Monsignor Charles Mollette, translated in the epilogue). A second, more limited edition was printed with a few additions and a better binding. It is that edition, with some minor alterations, that I have translated and edited here.
In the literature on World War II, not much appears about the use of foreign workers by the Nazi regime or their fate, especially in English, but also in French. However, one book, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944*, deals to some extent with the subject. Although the book is mostly about the politics of the Vichy regime under Marshall Pétain and its negotiations with the Nazi regime, the author, Robert Paxton, describes in some length the French government’s willing collaboration in providing Germany with French manpower. Paxton provides the following statistics: “By November 1943, 1,344,000 French males were working in German factories, slightly ahead of the Russian and Polish male contingents.” French women amounted to 44,000.4

In the introduction to the second edition of his book, in its French version, Paxton reiterates the point that “France became the principal foreign supplier of manpower, raw materials and manufactured goods for the German war machine.”5 A few pages later, he reemphasizes the point: “Of all the occupied western countries, it was France that supplied to the German factories the greatest number of workers.”6 What the book does not go into is the fate of these people and their suffering, especially those who were sent to Germany under the Service du Travail Obligatoire law. Paxton simply says: “The German government spared Frenchmen none of the agonies of forced labor.”7 It is on this point that Elie’s memoirs fill the gap.

As will be discussed further in the appendix, the French have on the whole been rather ambivalent in dealing with this important episode of the Vichy government’s collaboration with the Germans. Even the former STOs themselves are often reluctant to discuss their experiences, as the journalist Jean-Pierre Vittori says at the beginning of his book *Eux, Les S.T.O.*:

Often, they speak about their past with a certain embarrassment. They tell you: “I was STO,” as if they were admitting they had a contagious disease. This is because, in contrast to the former members of the *Résistance*, they do not measure up; these men . . . periodically faced the accusation: Didn’t they
work for Nazi Germany? Thus, when people who are not of their generation but want to know about their history and take the time to listen to them, they are astonished.8

When it comes to the studies of the STO, Vittori adds: “C’est le vide.”9 Beyond one great exception that Vittori mentions, there is nothing. Researchers from the universities are not interested. Whatever stories and documents are published on the subject are done at the expense of the authors. These works reveal facts that many in France prefer left untold. One of these is the little book of Roger Jaillot, Le Bal de la Classe, about a raid by the SS in Decize on February 6, 1944, on a banquet and a dance organized to celebrate the twentieth birthday of about fifty of those who would have been conscripted in normal circumstances.10 The women who participated in this dance were let go, but the young men were rounded up and sent to work in Germany. In that case, as in others, the French authorities often manipulated the figures, counting some of them as volunteers to work in Germany. Vittori, in his investigation of this affair from Decize, devotes several pages of his book to it and concludes: “The pseudo-volunteers from Decize maintain that they never signed any contracts. Were they signed for them?”11 The answer to this question is undoubtedly yes.

Vittori’s book does not neglect to refer to the fate of Christians attempting to live their faith. In the summer of 1943, the Nazi regime made it a crime for STOs to exercise their religion and for priests among them to say mass. It was in December 1943 that a systematic hunt of Catholics commenced. The Nazis were looking particularly for priests and seminarists who had come to Germany in the disguise of civil workers. JOC groups that had formed in the STO camps were to be dissolved. Those caught faced being sent to a prison or, worse, to a concentration camp.12

Vittori’s book is indeed an important journalistic investigation of the deportation of French workers to forced labor in Nazi Germany. The goal, as its author declared, was to find la vérité vraie.13 Indeed this book achieved its goal. Still, it did not provide the kind of testimony of the STOs’ suffering as Elie’s memoirs do.

The only real academic study of the STO, the exception Vittori mentions, is that of Jacques Evrard, La Déportation des Travail-
leurs Français dans le IIIe Reich, which was published in 1972. The author of this rather monumental work was a professor of literature at the lycée Bellevue of Toulouse, was himself a victim of the STO law, and spent two years at forced labor in Germany. When he started to do his research, he asked for some testimonies from former STOs. Those who responded to his request amounted to 152. Although their testimonies are not always footnoted, they are all listed at the end of the book’s bibliography, including my brother, Elie.

Evrard’s study has become the reference book of the deportation of French workers to Germany during World War II. The paucity of works on this subject was what spurred his research. As Evrard puts it in his foreword:

In France . . . if, after the collapse of Germany, at the time of investigations of war crimes, official bodies have mentioned the phases of requisitions of manpower; if several former déportés du travail have published their memories, no overall study has been devoted to their living conditions in the Third Reich. The present work, which—needless to say—does not pretend to be either complete nor especially definitive, tries to make up for this lacuna.

The book not only offers a history of the Vichy government’s deportation of French workers to Germany, especially under its prime minister Pierre Laval, it also goes into great detail about the work and the living conditions of the STOs. It describes all the difficulties that these young men faced from hunger and the lack of proper clothing during the harsh winters or for protection in the handling of certain dangerous products and the brutality of some of their overseers.

Many of the testimonies from STOs that are included in the book show that, more often than not, these captive workers were given tasks that were beyond their strength. Some of these young men were in fact worked to death. Here are a couple of examples Evrard provides:

At I. G. Farben, in Bitterfeld, because those who repaired the machines producing chlorine were not provided with masks,
they frequently suffered inflammation of the lungs and even of asphyxiation. But, a worker declares, “we did not dare to protest, because we always feared the disciplinary camp.” At the freight station of Innsbruck, Lucien Andréani had to unload from the railroad cars animals that had died during their too long journey, and, in Munich, Pierre Mas, employed by a recupera{tor} of bones, collected dead animals destined for . . . the Maggi plants.15

This important work thus presents another ugly side of the Nazi regime besides the horrors perpetrated in the concentration camps. In his conclusion, Evrard discusses the quarrel over the use of the word déporté, and the ambiguous status of the STOs in French society. He says:

Everything considered, this distressing quarrel around a word (a word that twenty-five years later involves the honor of one or another), it is on September 4, 1942, that it was born. The vic-tims of the S.T.O. would have never been suspected to have con- sentient, or half consented, to let themselves be sent to Germany if it were not for a French law, promulgated by the French gov- ernment and entrusted for its execution to the French bureau- cracy that subjugated them.16

Since the law was the work of Pétain’s prime minister Laval, a man convinced that collaboration with the Germans was in the interest of France and thus was willing to furnish them with French man- power, Evrard states that his “fault was terribly grave and his re- sponsibility damming.”17

It is interesting to note that Evrard’s book was never translated into English. The subject does not seem to interest either English or American academics. The reason, it can be ventured, is perhaps that neither Englishmen nor Americans were subjected to forced labor in Germany during World War II. Whatever the case may be, I hope that this book might be a valuable addition to the English and American literature on World War II.